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By Faith We Can See It Afar: Believing Isaiah's Word

CHARME ROBERTS

Imagine if you can, living in a world that calls good evil and evil good. Imagine a place where the powerful store up money and treasures while the poor and vulnerable go hungry. Imagine a cultural system that applauds immorality and whose icons lead undiscerning masses to open graves of unrestrained greed, lust, and hatred. Obviously, none of us has to work too hard to imagine such a place.

These are not new problems. The book of Isaiah presents a world strangely familiar to our own. Two powerful images emerge. On one hand is the picture of sin's ravaging ways; the aftermath is devastating. But filtering through this awful picture is the more powerful vision of deliverance and salvation. Isaiah invites the reader to see this bright vision through eyes of faith.

As ministers we must faithfully allow these images to guide our teaching, preaching, and pastoral work, for every culture and every era is the same—broken in every place by sin, with God's salvation our only hope. We cannot give up on speaking of these things. We must lead our communities to admit that sin's darkness is real, and we are the ones responsible for the mess we've made of things. But we must also stress with great passion that the darkness does not have to have the final word—the bright light of salvation can overcome it. This is what Isaiah asks of us. He asks his readers to believe that God is for us even when everything around us seems to the contrary. He asks us to see and to believe—if from afar—that a light has dawned (Isa 9:2).

THE INTERPLAY OF THE TEXT

The canonical shape of the book of Isaiah has received a great deal of attention with little consensus. Historical and literary reconstructions have produced ways of dealing with the meandering passages of the book, but, still, not everything is clear. For the purpose of this essay, which is taken from First Isaiah,¹ I am culling out the vivid pictures Isaiah presents of sin's aftermath and God's salvation. The two are juxtaposed throughout the book of Isaiah, each one in turn in bold relief of the other. The pictures move frame to frame in quick succession, revealing a God whose love is so fierce that he cannot bear the pain of his children's chastisement for long. A passage picturing distress and punishment gives way to the pleading voice of the Holy One of Israel who breaks through to save his people. The visions of salvation and renewal are interrupted by scenes of sin's "morning after." By noting this interplay and its proposed significance, we do not answer all the



interpretive questions, but perhaps we find a way to embrace both the bitter realities of sin and judgment and God's desire to bring salvation.

In Isaiah's situation, the pain of sin is spelled out in terms of a war-torn countryside set beside a picture of what once was and what should have been. God and the prophet mourn that the once faithful city had become a harlot and that where justice had once existed murders had taken up residence. Rulers were crooks, and the vulnerable citizens they should have protected had become their prey (1:21-23).² But this shameful behavior has not gone unpunished. Isaiah describes the reward of sin in terms of destruction God sent at the hands of the Assyrian army.

... why would you be beaten anymore? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head ... open sores ... unbandaged ... [you are like] a garden without water ... the bricks have fallen down ... the fig trees have been felled (1:5,6; 9:10).

Confrontation and righteous indignation are in high decibels here as Isaiah echoes God's righteous anger over the pitiful shape of his people. They are bruised and beaten, and their land is demolished. What is to be accomplished by this ranting and raving that the prophet and God are doing? The hope in describing the awful effects of sin like this is what Barbara Brown Taylor says preachers can do when talking about sin. She says,

[they can] describe the experience of sin and its aftermath so vividly that people can identify its presence in their own lives, not as a chronic source of guilt, nor as sure proof that they are inherently bad, but as the part of their individual and corporate lives that is crying out for change.³

The idea of confronting others about sin creates no little anxiety. Visions of red-faced, pulpit-pounding preachers who spew fire and brimstone send us running the other direction. But regardless of any abuses we might have experienced, to stray too far from the contours of the biblical story will not get the job done. In Scripture, sin is not ignored. Sometimes it is directly condemned, at other times it is simply described with its residual effects sweeping across the pages. Isaiah does a little of both, allowing the reality of sin's effect to sink in.

TOO BLIND TO SEE

Unfortunately, sin is not an easy foe. Though it begs for confrontation, the honest and discerning preacher or teacher knows the risks and challenges of the enterprise—not the least of which is that sometimes it doesn't work. Isaiah was duly warned in chapter 6 that the result of his preaching would not be a success—he would go to an audience with deaf ears and blind eyes. Why couldn't his audience hear or see? Among the collateral damages of sin is a loss of discernment. The power of sin sucks us into its whirlwind, taking with it reason and clear thinking. Isaiah 22 shows a stunning, almost comical scene of just this situation. With the threat of war and destruction all around them, God had called his people to a time of mourning (22:12), but instead there was

... joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine. "Let us eat and drink" you say, "for tomorrow we die!" (22:13)

Sin leads us blindly along with loss of discernment. We become painfully short sighted. We miss the import of our sin in all kinds of ways. We think sin is not so bad, or that it is "not hurting anyone but me."

Maybe worst of all, we think we can escape the consequences; we think things will go along with no repercussions. But Isaiah disabuses us of this myth, describing the terror that would come upon the unrepentant:

This sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging—that collapses suddenly, in an instant. It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth or scooping water out of a cistern (30:13,14).

These images of destruction echo other biblical wisdom that declares there will be consequences, that sin is its own reward, and its companion is death (cf. Ps 7:15; Prov 4:19). Throughout the book of Isaiah, the prophet spoke of what had already happened and what was yet to come as a result of sin. Though many had grown spiritually dull and would not listen, still the prophet spoke. With the ravages of sin as a referent, he called for change.

THE CALL TO SPEAK

It is important to note that Isaiah indicts both God's people (1-12) and the other nations of the world (13-27). Although we should be concerned to speak the truth about sin to those outside the church, the message must not be lost on believers. When I was teaching at Abilene Christian University in the late 1990s, a student said to me that she feared her generation had heard so much about grace that her peers were somewhat unconcerned about trying not to sin. Though what she heard reflects a wrong-headed view of grace, I am compelled to think seriously about my teaching. Israel and Judah were God's chosen people, but the prophet warned that those same people had degenerated to more spiritual ignorance than an ox or a donkey. The beasts at least know who their master is and where their food comes from, but not so the people of God (1:3). Continual negligence of their relationship with God left them undiscerning to the point that they called "evil good and good evil." (5:20).

Caring for each other in God's church requires a steady willingness to speak the truth about sin. Whether in public teaching or in our lives together as disciples, we cannot be cavalier or nonchalant about the matter. We cannot be so uneasy about speaking of sin that we reduce our ministry to patting each other on the back and saying, "Life is hard, but we do the best we can." While this is not a call to return to the fire-and-brimstone approach to dealing with sin, it is a call to take courage in confronting the harsh realities of sin so that we can repent.

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The natural tendency to assume that we are somehow exempt from God's judgments militates against repentance. But the convicting picture of chapters 13-27 wakes us from this coma. In this section, nation after nation receives God's judgment. Neither military might nor shrewdness has any strength compared to Israel's God. The arrogant are brought down. Even God's instruments of judgment—Assyria and Babylon—are among the judged. We can imagine Israel's glee in hearing about God's judgment against these other nations as they "got what they deserved."

But the joy turns to mourning when the same judgment comes upon the chosen people. The clear message is that trust in the power and trappings of this world will turn to idolatry and will be judged by God. In our own time this message cannot be ignored. Can we see our fault as individuals and our part in the corporate evil of the world's systems and powers? No one is exempt from the judgment of God. But for the penitent, there is hope—even after judgment.

There is no way to soften the fact that God actually punished his people. Because of Judah's continual rebellion against God, he removed his protective hand and freed the Assyrians to march against Judah in 701. When the march was over, a proverbial beaten body (1:5) was all that remained. The question, "Why would you be beaten anymore?" is confrontational, to be sure, but it is hard to miss the plea for change. God speaks in chapter 1 as a distraught father, wanting his children to return to the safety of the home.

Through the prophet, God calls his people to turn back from their sins of greed, neglect of the poor, and disregard for God's holiness. These sins had turned their streets into blood and their government into a joke (cf. chapters 1-5 *passim*). But even in spite of such a state of dishonor, God calls his people to the bright hope of salvation. Isaiah's vision of what can be beckons with images of glory that only God's power and will can bring about. Again from the early chapters in Isaiah:

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ... if you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land ... they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks ... neither will they train for war anymore ... they will throw away their idols of silver and idols of gold which they made to worship ... on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned ... the zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this (1:18, 19; 2:4, 20; 9:2, 7).

Are these pipe dreams? How can God or the prophet speak with such reckless hope? When have such things happened? Hope is a great mystery of our faith. We do not (nor did Isaiah) see the full accomplishment of these things, and it is hard to see how devastation holds any hope, and yet he spoke with certainty. Isaiah's staggering experience in the temple surely empowered him to speak:

... I saw the Lord, seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple (6:1).

I picture that event through the eyes of one soaked in American cinematography. I see mammoth feet and legs, perhaps only to the knee since the train of the Lord's robe filled the temple—could there have been room for much more? Descended from the sky, this Presence rested his feet in the holy temple, and Isaiah saw the wonder of it. Seraphim—flying, singing, chanting, roaring, circling—all around sounding their praises as the smoke-filled room spun in Isaiah's view. All senses overpowered—his lips burning from the coal of purification, eardrums bursting with the sound of the praise, his eyes bleary from the sights he cannot really describe, and his nostrils drinking in the stench of smoke, dust, and the fiery purging of sin. This king was surely more powerful than King Uzziah, who managed to stay on the throne for 52 years! And surely, ethereal vision eclipsed even the horrible picture of the war-torn countryside of Judah.

Isaiah could not have expected such an encounter. It is God who moves in, unannounced and uninvited.

If only I could see such a sight, then I too would speak with passion and boldness about sin and God's salvation! Oh, really? Do I really want that? And do I want the devastating news that this message would fall on deaf ears? (6:9) Surely the

room spun even faster at that. Queasy with dread, Isaiah must have staggered. And yet, the vision, and the gracious removal of his own sin propelled him forward, the sound of his own cries, "Send me!" fueling his will. Perhaps we should be grateful to have only read of such a thing, but we should be no less convicted of the call to speak.

NOT OUR OWN INVENTION

Isaiah could not have expected such an encounter. It is God who moves in, unannounced and uninvited. He makes the first move just as he did when becoming Israel's father and husband (chapter 1). He is the one who creates, nurtures, and sustains his vineyard; with him lies the fate of that unproductive mass of dirt and vines (chapter 5). Scripture presents God as the inventor of our relationship to him. No other god stoops so low as to entangle himself with humankind, knowing full well the rejection he will experience. It is this God who casts the revolutionary vision of nations walking in his paths and refusing to make war anymore (2:2-5).

Isaiah could never have invented or imagined such a God. It is not the way of men and women to love the unlovable; if we have learned this at all, it is because God has taught us. Humanity does not naturally lay down weapons in order to create farm implements so everyone can eat. But the God presented by the prophet does. The vision of God's Otherness, of his glory, and of his offer of salvation gives Isaiah his voice. The prayer of chapter 12 presents God's vision of hope.

In that day you will say: I will praise you O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation ... with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation (12:1-3).

Set in the context of "in that day," God sees a time when his people will acknowledge that judgment (here described as his anger) served a righteous end. The beautiful metaphor of drawing water from the wells of salvation reveals a shift from self-reliance to dependence on God. Earlier, Isaiah used the metaphor of water to describe Israel's penchant for rejecting God's governance.

Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoices over Rezin and the son of Remaliah, therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty flood waters of the River ...

The context for this is the Syro-Ephraimitic war. Judah's king Ahaz was being coerced into joining a coalition with Syria and Ephraim (Israel) to fight against Assyria. Ahaz was choosing the apparent strength of Rezin, king of Syria; and Pekah, king of Israel; over God. The Shiloah River ran gently through its channel, but the Euphrates—here and in other places shortened to "the River"—surged, churned, and flooded its banks. Why exchange God's governance for some other choice of our own?

Again, with Taylor's earlier point, we recognize this experience in our own lives. We are too familiar with the consequences of cutting our own paths, of trusting in the trappings of this world instead of in God. I spent several years teaching Bible classes in the county jail. I remember well a detainee's response to my rhetorical question. We had been discussing the Ten Commandments. I asked, "What if everyone obeyed these—what kind of world would we have?" She quickly answered, "I sure as hell wouldn't be here!" We know the ravage of our choices.

But the Bible's view is that we can turn back. God's vision of the wells of salvation can be realized in our own lives, and power of God's initiative is like a consuming fire. We must communicate well the

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power of sin without making it more powerful than the repentance and salvation God creates. Those who are blessed, comforted, and redeemed in Isaiah are the righteous; they are those who repent.

The twists and turns of Isaiah's book, the historical references remote from our own time and the cultural features present challenges for the church as we look to this part of Scripture for guidance. But the central messages of God's love for his people, his righteous judgment of their sin, his power to bring about what he has spoken, and his vision of salvation are timeless.

We do not have the right to speak of sin without offering God's light of salvation. To be sure, to speak of salvation makes little sense without conviction of sin. The book of Isaiah holds these together in ways that make sense to us as we train ourselves to hear the word of the Lord. While it is incorrect to view all biblical prophecy as predictive, its salient feature of presenting things that should be or could be or—in the case of judgment—what will be, call for a faith that delivers us from our short-sightedness.

By faith we can see it afar ...

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Isa 1-39.
- 2 NIV used throughout.
- 3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2000), 29.

